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ABSTRACT

"Who needs the student council?" The student needs the student council. Secondary school youth need practical experiences in doing those things expected of adults in a democratic society. The school needs the student council because the quality of education is improved when students are involved in an assessment of the educational experiences provided and have input in the ways the school can better meet the needs of the student and society. Society needs the student council as a way to prepare youth for successful living. If our democratic society is to survive, it must have a majority of adults who understand, appreciate, and participate in our democracy. The student council is the best means schools have yet devised to teach the ways of a democracy to our future citizens. Our youth must have practical experience in democracy and find these experiencies rewarding if they are to be loyal to democratic principles. (Author/DW)

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THE STUDENT COUNCIL:
WHO NEEDS IT?

NASSP Presentation Las Vegas, Nevada, February 1975

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INTRODUCTION

It is a deep personal privilege to address this meeting of the National Association of Secondary School Principals. This is the fifth time in the past twenty-five years that I have been invited to speak on topics related to the role of the student council in the secondary school. During this time many changes have taken place in secondary education. We have witnessed the growth of the student council from little more than "just another club" to an important part of the school's curriculum. We have seen the emphasis change from what the council could do for students and the school to what opportunities it provides for learning through participation. The next twenty-five years will result in additional changes.

The topic, "The Student Council, Who Needs It?" must have relevance and importance to you, otherwise you would not be here. The competition in Las Vegas is keen - I refer to the other discussion topics and school visits scheduled at this time not to mention other attractions.

I am well aware of the responsibility this opportunity provides. The challenge of the topic has forced me once again to justify the student council in terms of its contributions to the goals of education and the needs of society.

At the outset I think it should be stated that not all authorities or practitioners feel that there is a need for the student council in the modern secondary school. Some would imply that the student council is not a viable organization and like the extinct dodo

bird should be relegated to the history books. Others would imply that the student council provides the best means the schools have yet devised to teach the ways of a democratic society to large numbers of our future citizens. The latter is the author's position.

During the next twenty minutes the speaker will justify the student council as meeting the needs of three distinct but interrelated groups: the student, the school, and the society.

THE STUDENT

The primary function of the student council is to assist the school to achieve its major function by providing experiences in democracy for its youth. It seems logical that the student should receive primary consideration when we assess the needs of the school and the needs of society. All secondary school students need practical experiences in democracy in their homes, schools, and communities; and they need to find these experiences rewarding if they are to be loyal to democratic value systems. Otherwise, they can be expected to give only vague meanings to empty words, or what is even more dangerous, they will denounce the system and declare their allegiance to other forms of government.

The student council is needed today more than ever before. As I view high school students they are a serious lot. They are attempting to resolve the inconsistencies they see between what is taught in school about the American political and economic systems and the realities of the way things are: the way our schools are often administered, the courses that are taught, and how students are treated. The student council can bridge this gap between what

ought to be and what is, between theory and reality, between philosophy and practice.

Specifically, the student needs experiences in a wide variety of educational activities designed to prepare him for his role as a participating member in a democratic society. The author does not imply that the student council is the only way that students can learn through participation. Other school sponsored and community sponsored activities also have learning advantages. However, school principals should give special consideration to the advantages of the student council as a means to involve most, if not all, students in the life of the school. The student council is the one organization that represents all students. Other clubs and organizations, though they are open to all, do not represent all. This fact alone justifies the student council as a viable organization worthy of the principal's support.

The student needs experiences in decision-making procedures. Learning to look at alternatives and to make wise choices are other skills students learn through student participation in school government. The traditional classroom provides little opportunity for making meaningful choices. A democratic society, unlike other forms of government, provides for its citizens to share in decisions affecting them. The student council provides a similar opportunity for its members and the student body.

The student needs experiences in assuming the privileges and in accepting the responsibilities of citizenship in the school society. During the past decade many advances have been made in the area of

students' rights. If secondary school students are to become effective citizens, they must be given every opportunity to participate in the school-community with rights similar to those enjoyed by adult citizens. In a broad sense this means the freedom of speech, freedom to dress and to wear their hair as they choose, freedom to assemble peacefully, freedom to question, freedom to petition, freedom to expect due process and equal treatment under the law.

Students also need experiences in accepting the responsibilities and duties of school citizenship. The principal in the exercise of his authority as chief school administrator has a great responsibility to maintain and encourage constructive citizenship on the part of students. The student council has long been active in supporting those behaviors characteristic of the responsible citizen. Learning and practicing the responsibilities of informed citizenship is one of the values of student participation in school government.

The student needs experiences with democratic procedures for conducting discussion and securing action on specific proposals. Student council meetings should be seen not only as the medium through which the council carries on its business, but also, as a way of teaching the mechanics of discussion, compromise, strategy, majority rule, minority rights, voting and delegation of duties and responsibilities. Learning to use democratic procedures for conducting council business, whether by formal parliamentary law or by less formal techniques, is a logical outcome of student participation in school government.

The student needs experiences in doing those things that are expected of him as a member of a school society. The council should

sponsor a wide variety of projects and activities. The council should be concerned with all aspects of school life. As such, it should not be limited to traditional activities but should be involved in the total life of the school. All too often the council is involved only in the superficial aspects of school life and not the real problems of the school.

The nature and extent of student participation in council projects and activities will vary according to the level and experience of the learner. Children in the elementary school should be exposed to every opportunity possible to experience democracy in action. As the student advances through junior or middle school and into high school he should be provided more and different opportunities. By the time he is 18 years of age and ready to assume his majority as a voting citizen he should have witnessed first hand most, if not all of the experiences expected of him as a citizen in our adult society. The student needs experiences with both success and failure. Not every student election will result in the selection of the best qualified candidate for the office. Not every council project will be successful. Not every procedure will insure that the goal will be reached. A recognition that students will make mistakes and that on occasion they should be permitted to act in ways which are predictably unwise, should be part of the learning process inherent in student participation in school life. Failure of the student council on any given task does not mean that the school staff should view the council as a failure. This situation required adult understanding and help. Under the wise leadership of responsible adults, students learn as

much by experiencing failure as success.

In summary of part one the writer has attempted to justify the student council as a viable part of the school's curriculum because it meets the needs of the student. School principals should be cognizant of the fact that the student council is an essential element of secondary education because of the similarity between school experience and life experience. I see the difference between voting in a student council election and voting in a general election as differing only in fact not in the act.

THE SCHOOL

The school is the vehicle society has developed to prepare young people to function effectively in a democratic society. The secondary school is expected to build on the experiences pupils have had in the elementary school. Our task is to insure that our graduates will have the skills, facts, knowledges, attitudes, behavior patterns, and value systems that are required for successful participation in the adult society.

In the previous section we have seen some of the reasons why the student needs the experiences the student council provides if he is to become an effective citizen in a free society. Your attention in this section is directed to some of the reasons why the school as an institution and why you as the principal of the school need the student council.

To begin with it should be noted that it is impossible to inculcate democracy if the institution charged with this task is itself an authoritarian institution. School administrators have

found that when teachers are involved in the decision-making processes better decisions are made. Teachers as individuals and as members of professional organizations are asking for and receiving a piece of the action. They want to be involved not only in matters of wages and conditions of employment, but also, in matters affecting the entire educational process - curriculum, facilities, class size, textbook selection, and the like. Many school systems have some form of an agreement that defines the areas of teacher involvement and they have found that the end result is better education for America's youth.

Most school systems now involve the public in ways that were unheard of twenty-five years ago. Citizens are members of advisory councils and have input into decision that formerly were considered the exclusive domain of the Board of Education and administration. Schools are beginning to recognize that the public schools are, in fact, the public's schools.

Students are seeking similar status. Teachers who are the most successful have found ways to involve students in the teaching-learning process. In these classrooms there is an atmosphere of mutual trust and confidence between teacher and learner. This same principle should be extended to the entire school and the student council is the organization best suited for this task.

One of the ways the student council can become a more active organization and asset to the school is in terms of the projects and activities it is encouraged to sponsor. The traditional program of the past twenty-five years will not satisfy the needs of the secondary education today. The annual sequence of activities:

orientation of new students, selection of cheerleaders, homecoming dance, valentine social, teacher appreciation day, junior-senior prom, and the election of next year's all school officers must give way to new projects and activities.

Some means must be developed in each secondary school to involve more of the youth of the community in some of the real problems of education. It seems to the writer that students today deserve more from their schools than they are getting. The student council should become the agency in the school to facilitate student discussion and action in more areas of school life than is now the case in most secondary schools.

Some examples are cited: Students need to be involved in determining the goals of education. Students need to be involved in assessing the school's curriculum including the scope and sequence of courses taught, the methods used, and the evaluation procedures used to measure the extent to which the goals have been met. Students need to be involved in developing codes of conduct and student dress, statements of student rights and responsibilities, and in developing grievance procedures. Students need to be involved in all aspects of school life.

The foregoing was stated in such a way as to suggest that the emphasis was on the needs of the student. The author's intent was to demonstrate that the school needs the student council if the school is to be an enduring institution in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The school principal should demonstrate his faith in the ability of the student council to be part of the answers facing

secondary education by encouraging student participation in school management and administration.

Surely, one of the logical extensions of the foregoing is to emphasize the need for effective channels of communication between the council and principal. No other organization is better prepared to cope with the complexities of communication than the school council. Traditionally, the council is made up of students selected by their peers as officers or representatives who meet on a regular basis with an advisor. All too often the communication network has been from the principal to the advisor who expresses the principal's point of view to the council and then hopefully by the council members to the constituent groups. Problems are often identified by adults and referred to the council for solution. Principals have been guilty of using the council as a tool of the administration rather than as a source of information and help. I am tempted to ask, is anybody listening?

Principals need to learn how to listen to students if they are to provide effective leadership. Principals have developed effective ways to communicate to students - daily and weekly bulletins, special announcements, P.A. systems, school assemblies, and more. Now is an appropriate time to develop effective ways to listen. Again, is anybody listening?

Many of the confrontations in secondary schools during the past decade could have been prevented if school officials would only listen to student concerns and grievances. It does not matter that a great majority of high school youth remain loyal, content, conservative,

cooperative, and even apathetic when a determined minority of students is trying to tell us something. Again, is anybody listening?

Principals need not always agree with what students are saying nor condone the way students are expressing their opinions. There is no justification for violence, for disruption of classes, for destruction of property, for interruptions of the school's program. However, high school youth, especially those in large metropolitan centers are saying something and we had better know what it is. They are saying, "Hey, look, I am somebody and I want to be recognized as an individual." Again, is anybody listening?

As one possible solution to this dilemma the author suggests better visibility and person-to-person communication between the principals and the council. Principals should be seen as well as heard; they should be visible to students. All too often the principal is viewed by students as a cool, formal, unapproachable person who resides in an office surrounded by books, a briefcase, telephone, wall plaques and certificates of membership in professional associations, and other paraphernalia. If you don't believe this, look at the way principals are pictured in school yearbooks. They are invariably seated behind a desk with a pen or telephone in one hand and a stack of papers in the other.

The principal should attend and participate in council meetings. This person should be in the halls, classrooms, lunchroom, student center and wherever students gather so he can engage in open communication with the school's clientele. In this way the principal can be viewed as a warm, friendly, human individual who cares and

listens to students.

The school needs a viable student council if it is going to serve as an effective instrument of society. The student council offers meaningful and worthwhile opportunities for student input and involvement in some of the major problems facing secondary education today. The council not only serves as a constructive vehicle to teach democratic values to students, but also, is a way to improve the school. School administrators should foster the growth of the student council as much for the school's sake as for the student's sake. An honest dialogue between the council and the principal will do much to improve secondary education in America's secondary schools.

THE SOCIETY

Social organizations and political systems of all types and at all times are inherently interested in preserving, perpetuating, and improving a way of life. In our society we are committed to the principles of democratic institutions and government. It seems logical then to assume that the program of education must center on the democratic way of life. Governments support the public schools fundamentally because they see the public school as the instrument of society best able to prepare the youth of the community for successful living in the society.

The secondary schools of this nation have long been concerned with education for citizenship. The founding fathers of the Constitution expressed the need for an informed and involved citizenry. All of the statements of the goals of education from the Cardinal Principles of Education to those now being prepared by professional associations,

governmental agencies, and civic groups have stressed the need for education in citizenship. Few would disagree that the youth of this nation must have an awareness and commitment to democratic principles and procedures.

In the United States, committed as we are to the principles of democratic institutions and government, the programs of education must center on the democratic way of living. The youth of this nation must have an understanding of and a loyalty to democratic procedures and principles. The future of our society depends upon the schools doing this job well.

SUMMARY

In this paper the author has attempted to answer the question, "Who needs the student council?" In the first place, the student needs the student council. Secondary school youth need practical experiences in doing those things that are expected of adults in a democratic society. The student councils of America provide this opportunity because of the similarities between school and society.

Secondly, the school needs the student council. The quality of education is improved when students are involved in an assessment of the educational experiences provided and have input into ways the school can better meet the needs of the student and society.

Finally, our society needs the student council. The primary function of education is to prepare the youth of a society for successful living in that society. If our democratic society is to survive, it must have majority of adults who understand, appreciate, and participate in our democracy. The student council is the best means

schools have yet devised to teach the ways of a democracy to our future citizens. Our youth must have practical experience in democracy and find these experiences rewarding if they are to be loyal to democratic principles. The student council serves this function.

Who needs the student council? Everybody does!!